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MISSION AND ETHICS IN THE WRITINGS OF IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

Paul Foster

paul.foster@ed.ac.uk

Abstract

Mission and ethics are not the most prominent concerns in the writings of Ignatius. However, when these ideas surface they reveal some fascinating attitudes in Ignatius' thought. Where the two ideas intersect Ignatius instructs believers that their ethical behaviour should be attractive to non-believers. His ethical framework is shaped by two discernible forces, wider Hellenistic reflections on virtue ethics, and secondly, Ignatius' core christological beliefs. In terms of mission, Ignatius is open in his attitude towards those who are gentile non-believers. This forbearance towards non-believers is exemplified by the fact that Ignatius can refer to them as 'brothers and sisters'. Despite the fleeting reflections on mission and ethics in the writings of Ignatius, when such ideas surface his thought shows a degree of sophistication and development in comparison to New Testament perspectives.

1. INTRODUCTION

The twin themes of mission and ethics find their general relationship through reflection on the ethical treatment of those whom the community of believers is seeking to introduce to its common faith. At its heart early Christianity was a missionary religion with a strong impetus towards the conversion of those outside the movement (Schnabel 2004).¹

This can be seen at numerous places within the New Testament itself. While it would be anachronistic to class it as a 'Christian' mission, Jesus charge, either to the twelve or to the seventy, to actively proclaim the message of the kingdom is a dominically inaugurated mission that stands at the heart of his Galilean ministry.² In the post-resurrection period the activities of Paul and his co-workers are perhaps the most prominent examples of early Christian mission, and the impact of such work shaped not only the content of the letters of Paul,³ but also formed the narrative framework of the earliest history of the movement.⁴ Furthermore, the most widely circulating gospel in the second century⁵ concludes with a commission addressed to the eleven, instructing them to make disciples and to follow the teachings of Jesus (Matt 28.19-20).⁶ Given that the character of Jesus' teaching in the Gospel of

¹ The major study on missionary activity in the early Jesus movement is Schnabel 2004. Ignatius, however, does not play a large part in Schnabel's work with the letters being cited mainly to corroborate certain historical observations about Christian communities.

² The inauguration of mission by Jesus has multiple attestation in the synoptic sources. The charge to the Twelve is recorded in the triple tradition, Matt 10.1, 7-11, 14//Mk 6.6b-13//Lk 9.1-6. The commissioning of the seventy is a redactional creation of the third evangelist, but the instructions they receive comes from a Q version of the missionary charge, Matt 9.37-38; 10.7-16//Lk. 10.2-16. The source critical relationships are difficult to fully untangle since Matthew has engaged in a thoroughgoing conflation of these Mark-Q overlap passages. For a detailed analysis of the source critical complexities see Fleddermann 1995: 101-126.

³ There is an extensive treatment of the Pauline mission in Schnabel 2004: vol. 2, 923-1485; and more recently Plummer & Terry 2012.

⁴ The genre of the *Acts of the Apostles* is much disputed. However, given its presentation and temporal sequencing of events in the first three or four decades of the post-Easter Jesus movement it is not inappropriate to describe the contents as 'history' or a 'historical source' in a meaningful sense, regardless of whatever the authorial intent may have been concerning the genre of his work. See Adams 2013, who, while proposing the genre should be understood as collected biography, sets out the full range of different proposals surrounding the genre of the work.

⁵ The Gospel of Matthew is the most frequently cited gospel in the works of the church fathers, see Argyle, 1963: 1. Moreover, its priority in the fourfold gospel canon only served to increase its pre-eminence.

⁶ The final pericope in Matthew's gospel re-articulates a number of key Matthean themes, see (Foster, 2005a: 239-247). Gundry states that Matt 28.16-20 presents 'a compendium of important Matthean themes.' He concludes by stating that 'Paramount among these themes, however, is the mission to all nations.' (Gundry 1994: 593).

Matthew has a strong ethical emphasis, such as in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7), the connection between the missionary imperative and the ethical agenda of the early Jesus movement is perhaps nowhere more clearly seen in the New Testament than in Matthew's gospel.

This final example is particularly salient when considering the topics of mission and ethics in relation to the writings of Ignatius of Antioch. The corpus of Ignatius' seven authentic letters contains one of the earliest witnesses to the reception of Matthew's gospel (Foster 2005b: 159-186). While there is not extensive use of the first gospel (2005b: 173-181), there is sufficient evidence to assume that Ignatius was familiar with that gospel and had been exposed to both the ethical teaching it attributed to Jesus, as well as to the risen Lord's final words commanding an outward-facing mission, which was inclusive of all the nations. Furthermore, a number of the letters of Paul have left an even deeper imprint on the writings of Ignatius, especially 1 Corinthians and to a lesser extent Ephesians and First and Second Timothy (2005b: 163-172). Again, given these connections with key New Testament texts that promote mission and espouse a strong ethical teaching, it is interesting to explore how these concerns have shaped the thought of Ignatius, a figure for whom we have a fleeting window into his life at the time when its end is fast approaching (Holmes 2007: 166).

1. 1. Mission in the Letters of Ignatius

The theme of mission is not particularly prominent in the writings of Ignatius, especially if that topic is understood narrowly as instances where the text provides direct exhortation to engage in missionary activity, or narrates aspects of Christian mission – as for example in the Acts of the Apostles. In fact, if those factors were taken as the metrics for gauging Ignatius' interest in mission, one would perhaps have to conclude that mission was of little interest to Ignatius.

However, if one adopts a wider definition, so as to incorporate engagement with outsiders where there is concern with the impression made by believers on those who do not share their religious beliefs, then the evidence is slightly more fruitful although mission is never a central theme in Ignatius' writings. In fact on this basis there is only one passage in Ignatius' epistles that explicitly provides instruction about behaviour towards outsiders, while linking this to a missionary concern.

Pray continually for the others of humankind as well, for there is in them hope of repentance, that they might find God. Therefore allow them to be instructed by you, at least by your deeds. In response to their anger, be gentle; in response to their boasts, be humble; in response to their slander, offer prayers; in response to their errors, be steadfast in faith; in response to their cruelty, be civilized; do not be eager to imitate them. Let us show by our forbearance that we are their brothers and sisters ... (*I.Eph.* 10.1-3a).

The injunction to intercede for all people who are not believers is focused specifically on praying for their repentance. The metaphor of 'finding God' reveals Ignatius' concern for the conversion of those who are not part of the wider Christian community. The attitude towards humanity as a whole displays both hopefulness and openness. In many ways this is all the more striking given the hostility with which Ignatius has written about those whom he portrays as false teachers (Schoedel 1985: 69).

From Ignatius' perspective such false teachers 'carry about the name maliciously and unworthily' (*I.Eph.* 7.1), they are 'rabid dogs' and 'wild beasts' (*I.Eph.* 7.1), they 'belong to the flesh [and] cannot do spiritual things' (*I.Eph.* 8.2), and they have come from elsewhere 'with evil doctrine' (*I.Eph.* 9.1). It is not uncommon in new religious movements to view those who had not maintained commitment to the new faith, or those who teach a related but rival form of the religious system as being more pernicious than those who have remained outside the struggling and embryonic

movement. This may be because group cohesion is more acutely threatened by internal schism, since it undermines the group's narrative of being a purer or reformed belief system. By contrast, those external to the group conform to the larger religious narrative of the new movement, even if they actively persecute or passively reject the teachings of the group. This is because they may form the necessary entity against which the group counter-narrative can be read. Furthermore, such opposing forces allow the group to define its own identity and to view its task as rescuing others out of the world, or some such named dominant power structure (Bainbridge 1997: 134-141).

Thus Ignatius' emphasis on prayer for the rest of humanity calls for a wider Christian concern for people outside their own communities. Moreover, the adverb ἀδιαλείπτως, 'continually', demands that intercession for outsiders is to be a constant and ongoing practice (cf. 1 Thess 5.17).⁷ Ignatius depicts a theological basis for this commitment to prayer. It is the recognition that unbelieving humanity has a predisposition, or a natural tendency towards 'hope of repentance'. Hence, from this perspective, Ignatius' theologically motivated anthropology understands human beings to have a deep-seated desire to re-order their lives. It appears that Ignatius views the prayers which the Ephesians offer as the mechanism by which the 'hope of repentance' can be activated in those who are not already part of the believing community. The activation of hope is not the goal in itself. Rather, as the purposive clause indicates, the goal of the prayer, which ignites hope for repentance, is that the others of humankind, who have not become believers 'might attain God.'

The expression ἵνα θεοῦ τύχωσιν is not employed in the New Testament, however its general sense as a soteriological formulation is clear. Ignatius also reveals his theological perspective that the deeds or works performed by believers may function as the means through which non-believing humanity is instructed concerning the qualitatively different lifestyles of those who follow the Lord. What follows is a catalogue of five examples of deeds that serve to instruct outsiders about the type of behaviour that exemplifies Christian life.⁸ Herein, Ignatius promotes an ethic of non-retaliatory humility and faithfulness in the face of opposition. The response that is to be given is explicitly and intentionally counter-cultural. Therefore, Ignatius instructs the Ephesians not to be eager to imitate the practices of those outside the believing community. This is not only because believers are to be gentle and humble in their response, but also more significantly because they are to provide an example of superior ethical behaviour, and not to derive their response from certain typical Gentile practices.

Ephesus was the largest of the five cities in Asia Minor that were the recipients of the letters written by Ignatius, and this may help to explain the advice concerning interactions with outsiders for the small Christian community within this large urban centre.⁹ It is possible that Ignatius may be offering the Ephesian community the same strategic counsel that he suggested in his own city of Antioch, which was also a significant population centre.¹⁰ While the specific social dynamics differed from *polis* to *polis*, there are a number of common features. In particular, most cities in the Eastern Mediterranean shared the common pan-Hellenistic religious system, but integrated with local variation. Thus as Zetterholm observes, '[w]hile the Greek

⁷ Lightfoot suspects that the word ἀδιαλείπτως might have been a secondary insertion under the influence of 1 Thess 5.17. However, the basis for this supposition is not particularly strong. (Lightfoot, 1889: vol. 2, 57-58).

⁸ Schoedel proposes that this series of five parallel clauses is loosely 'based on a free tradition of the words of Jesus (cf. Matt 5:39-42, 44; Luke 6:27-28).' (Schoedel 1985: 69).

⁹ Estimating the size of any city in the Roman world during the first two centuries of the common era is fraught with the issues surrounding dependence upon inexact measures. A common estimate for the population of Ephesus in the period is in the range of 200,000-250,000, see Trebilco 2004: 17.

¹⁰ While ancient sources may offer an exaggerated estimate of the population size of Antioch, recent estimates have been around 100,000 inhabitants. (Norris 1992: 265).

pantheon basically consisted of the twelve pan-Hellenistic Olympian deities, on a local level various gods had different traits and characteristics' (Zetterholm 2003: 25).

In a different context and in a greatly condensed form Ignatius also exhorts the Smyrnaeans to pray for opponents. Here, however, the key difference is that rather than counselling prayer for unbelievers, he is calling for prayer for those teaching that Christ 'suffered in appearance only' (*I.Smyr.* 2.1). Following on from a description and rebuttal of their teaching, Ignatius describes the purpose of his warning to the Smyrnaeans, and the prayerful action they must take.

I am guarding you in advance against wild beasts in human form – people whom you must not only not welcome but, if possible, not even meet. Nevertheless, do pray for them, that somehow they might repent, difficult though it may be. (*I.Smyr.* 4.1).

While this injunction to pray parallels the example in *I.Eph.* 10.1 in form, and the purpose of prayer is again linked with repentance, here the tone is less optimistic and less generous. As Schoedel observes, '[t]he Smyrnaeans to be sure, are to pray for the false teachers, whereas the Ephesians are only asked to pray for their pagan persecutors of whose repentance Ignatius is more hopeful' (Schoedel 1985: 231). In this way one sees that Ignatius adopts a far harder line towards those whom he believes are teaching false ideas about Christ's incarnation among believers,¹¹ than he does in regard to gentiles who need to be instructed by the example of Christian gentleness as a means of producing a repentant attitude. This suggests that levels of conflict with those outside the community are low. Furthermore, there is a level of comfort with wider Hellenistic culture.

1. 2. Ignatius' Attitude towards Judaism

While Ignatius' outlook towards non-believers is both positive and relatively open, it would be anachronistic to characterise him as having modern pluralistic religious sympathies. Nowhere is his intolerance more clear than in his attitude towards Judaism. His rebarbative tone is less directly addressed against wider Judaism as a whole, but is more specifically focused against either those Jews, or Christian believers with Jewish tendencies, who teach a Judaizing form of the faith. Toward such people he is truculent and aggressive. This is seen primarily in two of his epistles, *Magnesiens* and *Philadelphians*, where he addresses this topic in some detail. In *Smyrnaeans*, there is a reference to Jews more generally, and in this context the topic is mentioned tangentially.

In the first of these epistles Ignatius tackles the topic twice, and characterises the practice of Judaism as being antithetical to the reception of salvation. His first strategy is to equate acceptance of a Jewish lifestyle with seduction by false teaching.

Be not seduced by strange doctrines nor by antiquated fables, which are profitless. For if even unto this day we live after the manner of Judaism, we avow that we have not received grace (*I.Mag.* 8.1).

The near paranoia about acceptance of Jewish practices may be a reflection of concerns about the viability of the nascent movement, and the fear that by taking up Judaizing practices Christian believers would lose their distinctive faith commitment and simply be re-absorbed back into the Jewish religion from which it had broken. Jefford recognizes that such a statement arises from attempts to safeguard a meaningful self-definition. He suggests that this concern 'forced Christians to define their faith and mission apart from the history and concerns of Judaism. As a result, fear arose that the church would relapse into the religion from which it had only recently departed' (Jefford 2012: 53).

¹¹ As Löhr suggests this passage is another example of Ignatius presenting a strong antidocetic christology of 'the full incarnation up to the suffering, death, and bodily resurrection' to combat the teachings of those he opposes (Löhr 2010: 110).

Ignatius bases his argument both upon his supersessionary perspective, and also on his understanding that the prophets lived in proleptic obedience to Christ's message. In what follows, without explanation as to how it was possible, Ignatius simply declares that 'the divine prophets lived after Jesus Christ' (*I.Mag.* 8.2). Instead, rather than providing a logical justification for his assertion, Ignatius asserts that the pattern of their life was according to Christ because of the persecutions they experienced. Although there is no elucidation of this claim, one may infer that Ignatius is able to place the prophets on the side of Christian believers since both groups were persecuted at the hands of the Jews. From this assertion, Ignatius draws the even more bold inference that the prophets who 'walked in ancient practices' found their new hope by 'no longer observing the Sabbaths but fashioning their lives after the Lord's day' (*I.Mag.* 9.1). Schoedel, perhaps correctly, suggests that Ignatius' logic is that 'divine men would know the true (spiritual) meaning of the seventh day (cf. John 5:17; Heb 4:4-11)', (Schoedel 1985: 69). From the example of the prophets, Ignatius exhorts his addressees to 'endure patiently' as the prophets did, and to hold exclusively to 'Jesus Christ our only teacher' (*I.Mag.* 9.1). Interestingly from this discussion, Ignatius is able to combine his injunction for avoidance of a Jewish lifestyle, with a call for Christian believers to live in accordance with Christ's goodness. The idea is integrated into Ignatius' wider train of thought since he understands that 'goodness' is only possible for those who are Christ's disciples, and cannot be attained by those who follow a different pattern of life. Hence Ignatius returns after this statement to his major premise that believers must reject Jewish practices.

It is utterly absurd to profess Jesus Christ and to practice Judaism. For Christianity did not believe in Judaism, but Judaism in Christianity, in which every tongue believed and was brought together to God. (*I.Mag.* 10.1).

Here Ignatius' supersessionist perspective comes to the fore more strongly. Christianity is viewed as both a replacement for Judaism, and the effective means for a universal, rather than an ethnically limited salvation. This temporal perspective reinforces Ignatius' earlier caricature of Judaism as consisting of 'antiquated fables' (*I.Mag.* 8.1).

In the letter to the *Philadelphians* Ignatius further develops his arguments against adopting Jewish practices. A situation is described that seems to suggest, at least in Philadelphia, that the encouragement to adopt Jewish practices was not coming from circumcised ethnic Jews, but from uncircumcised believers who promoted a Judaizing lifestyle as requisite for adherents to the Christian movement.¹² If Ignatius' description can be seen as an accurate and fair account of the situation, circumcision may not have been part of the message of these Judaizing teachers, since Ignatius describes them as uncircumcised. It appears less likely that Ignatius is using the terms 'circumcision' and 'uncircumcision' in a spiritual sense. While Paul can make such a transposition, he makes it transparent when he is doing so (cf. Rom 2.25-29). By contrast, Ignatius offers no clues that he writing metaphorically. Instead he simply counsels against allowing uncircumcised people to pressurize the Philadelphian believers to follow certain aspects of Jewish lifestyle.

But if anyone expounds Judaism to you, do not listen to him. For it is better to hear about Christianity from a man who is circumcised than about Judaism from a man who is not. But if either of them fails to speak about Jesus Christ, I look on them as tombstones and graves of the dead, upon which only the names of people are inscribed. (*I.Phld* 6.1).

Here Ignatius makes two related assertions. First, the content of message being expounded is the measure by which to judge its quality. In his final statement, Ignatius makes it clear that proclamation about Jesus Christ is to be the yardstick for

¹² Lightfoot appears to read the text in this way since he states, 'In this case the *teachers* would be represented, not as Jewish Christians, but as Gentile Christians with strong Judaic tendencies.' (Lightfoot, 1889: vol. 2, 264).

assessing the value of the message various teachers might announce. The possibility of hearing ‘about Christianity from a man who is circumcised’ could be a theoretical notion presented to create a rhetorical comparison. However, the second circumstance mentioned, hearing about Judaism from an uncircumcised person, is perhaps the real issue driving this whole discussion. This is suggested by the opening premise ‘if anybody expounds Judaism to you’, coupled with the following instruction, ‘do not listen to him’ (*I.Phld.* 6.1). However, Schoedel argues for the concrete existence of both groups. He states,

It may be, however, that we should take Ignatius more literally and recognize that when he refers to “both of them” (ἀμφότεροι) in the third sentence, he has in mind the two groups mentioned in the second sentence. In that event, he has in mind (a) a group of circumcised Jewish Christians and (b) a group of uncircumcised gentile Christians and regards the latter as followers of the former. We could assume that the gentile Christians would not have been circumcised because circumcision was not always required of proselytes. Yet both groups would represent the same interests, and from Ignatius’ point of view would be guilty of not “speaking of Jesus Christ.” (Schoedel 1985: 202).

While there is much that is plausible in this reading, the fundamental problem, which Schoedel himself recognizes is that Ignatius appears to regard positively the possibility of hearing about Christianity from a circumcised person (Schoedel 1985: 202). Thus he appears to create a clear distinction between these two cases, and does not regard them as representing ‘the same interests’ in an undifferentiated manner.

Ignatius rebarbative tone against Judaism appears not to be directed against ethnic Jews who do not accept the Christian message, but is in opposition to ethnic gentiles or Jews who attempt to persuade fellow believers of the need to adopt Jewish practices alongside Christian belief. From Ignatius’ viewpoint the former does not simply weaken the Christian message, it actually negates that message about Jesus. While the requirement of circumcision is unlikely to have been part of the Judaizing agenda, Sabbath observance may have been a more typical requirement. Although not mentioned in the correspondence with the Philadelphians, when addressing the Magnesians the issue of Sabbath observance comes to the fore. Directed to those who wish to ‘continue to live in accordance with Judaism’ (*I.Mag.* 8.1), the example of the prophets is presented as an example of those who rejected the Sabbath in favour of observing the Lord’s day (*I.Mag.* 9.1). Whether the Judaizing teaching also involved dietary strictures is impossible to determine from the scant evidence in the Ignatian corpus.

The other reference to ‘Jews’ in Ignatius’ letters occurs in a passage where he declares that the incarnate Son of God underwent crucifixion. In that context, Ignatius states that Christ was ‘truly nailed in the flesh for us ... in order that he might raise a banner for the ages through his resurrection for his saints and faithful people, whether among Jews or Gentiles, in the one body of his church’ (*I.Smyrn.* 1.2). As part of what is seen as verging on being a creedal affirmation, here the totality of Ignatius’ attitude towards outsiders is seen. Whether outsiders are Jews or Gentiles, Ignatius’ aspiration is that both should be integrated into the unified ‘one body of his church’. In this sense past identities are stripped away and become meaningless. Only one identity has any value from Ignatius’ perspective, namely that of being a Christian and being part of the *corpus mixtum* of the church. The language also feeds into Ignatius’ wider ecclesiology, that the church is more than its local manifestation (Löhr 2010: 105). The church is translocal, and members share equal status without any reference to former ethnic status. Therefore, Ignatius promotes a charter of equality. However, such equality is for those who were previously outsiders, but have been drawn into the united Christian community.

1. 3. Ignatius' Ethics

One problem facing those who seek to discern the ethical agenda of biblical writings is that these texts are not primarily ethical treatises. Therefore, one has to read such texts inductively, and to draw wider inferences from statements about moral behaviour that are partial, fleeting, and addressed to specific situations. Notwithstanding these caveats, such endeavours to determine the ethical perspectives of a particular biblical writer, such as Paul, have been a continuing concern for successive generations of New Testament scholars. Typically there is a move from the situationally specific moral imperatives to the universally general ethical principles. Such universalised ethics are frequently linked to wider theological perspectives that are found in an author's writings. Bultmann, for example, saw Paul's ethical statements as fundamentally grounded, and perhaps limited, by his eschatological perspectives. He argued that '[s]ince Paul expects the end of the present aeon to arrive soon, the life of the believer in this world for him never became a problem to the same extent as it was for Luther' (Bultmann 1995: 215). However, for Bultmann, the task confronting the exegete was to extrapolate meaningful ethical principles from these theologically shaped and situationally based ethical imperatives. His own attempt to draw out the ethical principles was based upon seeing them grounded in the common experience of believers receiving the gift of God's spirit:

The believer can only understand this mode of existence as God's gift. Just as the moral demand – expressed by the imperative – is God's command for him, so the attitude of obedience – corresponding to that demand – is at the same time God's gift, brought about by the πνεῦμα (spirit), so that the demand does not lose its character as an imperative (Bultmann 1995: 216).

The problem, however, is more acute in relation to the letters of Ignatius than is the case with the Pauline Epistles. Paul sets out a number of ethical imperatives for his newly founded communities. He calls for moral reformation (Thompson 2011: 1-18), and in some of the letters that bear his name household codes are set out to regulate relationships between believers and those in the closest social units. By contrast, Ignatius offers little direct ethical instruction, whether of a situationally specific nature or as more fundamental overarching ethical principles. However, there are fragments of ethical ideas scattered throughout Ignatius' writings, rather than a developed or consistent treatment of the ethical behaviour required from believers.

At a few points Ignatius does seem to allude to some type of overarching ethical conception. Perhaps shaped by the Hellenistic culture of which he was part, his ideas appear to resonate to some extent with Aristotelian virtue ethics, although even here Ignatius' thought is refracted through his Christian understanding of the deity. Without noting the link with Hellenistic virtue ethics, Löhr describes the dialectic that exists between the wider cultural forces shaping Ignatius' ethical perspectives and the theological forces that modify and redefine those perspectives. Therefore, Löhr states that '[t]he implicit ethics of the Ignatian letters is oriented towards virtue on the one hand and teleologically structured on the other' (Löhr 2010: 111). This relationship can be seen when Ignatius addresses the Smyrneans. He both encourages them to pursue the good, but also informs them of divine support in that pursuit:

Being perfect, also think perfect things. For if you wish to do good, God is ready to help you.

τέλειοι ὄντες τέλεια καὶ φρονεῖτε θέλουσιν γὰρ ὑμῖν εὖ πράσσειν θεὸς ἑτοιμος εἰς τὸ παρέχειν (I.Smyr. 11.3).

The desire to do good is central to wider Hellenistic ethical understanding, such as those exemplified by Plato or Aristotle. The latter, in his opening proposition states, 'every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim.' (Arist. *Nic.Eth.* 1.1). Furthermore, Aristotle gives an anthropological definition of what the good means: 'human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue' (Arist. *Nic.Eth.* 1.7.5). Unlike the extended discourse that Aristotle devotes to the subject of the ethical or virtuous life, Ignatius' primary purpose is not to define or provide

examples of ethical living. However, at various places in his epistles it is possible to discern some of the moral actions that Ignatius assumes to be incumbent upon those to whom he writes.

1. 3. 1. *Ephesians*

In his epistle to the Ephesians Ignatius' central concern is to oppose the teachings of those he depicts as a dissident group (*I.Eph.* 7-9), while encouraging his addressees to remain in a harmonious relationship with the one he regards as the legitimate bishop. Yet amidst these doctrinal and ecclesial concerns, Ignatius hints at a number of his guiding ethical principles, which he also views as relevant to fellow believers. In heavily theologized language, Ignatius offers a general maxim against unethical behavior. He states, 'no-one professing faith sins, nor does any one possessing love hate' (*I.Eph.* 14.2). This ethical observation appears to resonate with similar connections between the authentication of Christian life through ethical action in the Johannine epistles (1 Jn 3.4-10; 4.20; 5.18) (Schoedel 1985: 76). Given the likely connection between Ephesus and the Johannine writings, it is perhaps intentional that Ignatius emphasizes the twin virtues of faith and love as being foundational not only for individual believers, but as being in their ultimate for the characteristics which exemplify divinity. Therefore, faith and love appear to take on deified ontological meaning:

For these are the beginning and the end of life: faith is the beginning and love is the end, and the two, when they exist in unity, are God. Everything else that contributes to excellence follows from them. (*I.Eph.* 14.1).

This pairing of faith and love also picks up a central affirmation in Ignatius' christologically based ethics. Towards the beginning of the letter Ignatius informs the Ephesians that they have been given a 'much loved name', which they 'possess by a just nature according to faith and love in Christ Jesus' (*I.Eph.* 1.1). Consequently, faith and love, which stem from union with Christ, result in ethical attitudes and behavior. Moreover, the faith and love that originate in union with Christ are to become the hallmarks of the virtuous Christian life (Schoedel 1985: 41).

Ultimately, the highest pattern of life for believers is attained through imitation of the divine. Hence Ignatius declares, '[b]eing imitators of God, once you took on new life through the blood of God you completed perfectly the task so natural to you' (*I.Eph.* 1.1). In the same way that Ignatius refers to 'Jesus Christ our God' in the salutation to this epistle, the reference to 'the blood of God' reflects that the God whom Ignatius instructs believers to imitate is Jesus Christ. This *imitatio Christi* is a repeated aspect of the transformed christological ethics that Ignatius calls upon his readers to practise in their lives. This theme will come up elsewhere in his letters, and imitation of the faith and love of Christ even to the point of death is the fullest expression of discipleship and virtuous Christian life (Löhr 2010: 111).

1. 3. 2. *Magnesians*

Ethical issues do not come to the fore in writing to the believers in Magnesia. In calling for allegiance to their youthful bishop Damas, Ignatius states that 'obedience without hypocrisy' should arise from the experience of divine love (*I.Mag.* 3.2). Therefore, the experience of being recipients of love should result in correct behavior. Without spelling out moral acts that stem from them, the triad of the ideas of faith, love and death are joined in Ignatius' thought: 'the faithful in love bear the stamp of God the Father through Jesus Christ, whose life is not in us unless we voluntarily choose to die into his sufferings' (*I.Mag.* 5.2). The reference to dying into the sufferings of Christ could, but does not necessarily entail martyrdom. As Schoedel suggests, it may refer more generally to believers 'as following a way of life determined by the hostility of the "world" (cf. *Rom.* 3.3)', (Schoedel 1985: 111).

The theme of *imitatio* is present once again, but only fleetingly so in the injunction to replicate divine attitudes. However, such an outlook can only be achieved in union with Christ, the outcome of which is correct community relationships. Hence Ignatius states, '[l]et all, therefore, accept the same attitude as God and respect one another, and let no one regard his neighbour in merely human terms, but in Jesus Christ love another always' (*I.Mag.* 6.2). Thus, according to Ignatius, love of fellow believers is a key ethical virtue within the community. Ignatius also calls upon the Magnesians 'to be firmly grounded in the precepts of the Lord and the apostles' (*I.Mag.* 13.1). This grounding ἐν τοῖς δόγμασιν may combine a deontological approach to ethics¹³ with the more prominent reliance on virtue ethics elsewhere in the writings of Ignatius.

1. 3. 3. Trallians

Ignatius commences his address to the Trallians by declaring that they have 'a disposition that is blameless and unwavering in patient endurance, not from habit but by nature' (*I.Trall.* 1.1). Here intellectual stability and rectitude exemplify the ethical character of the Trallians. The fact that these attributes belong to the Trallians by nature, aligns with the Aristotelian perspective that a person who is unqualifiedly good has by nature a disposition to practice all the virtues (cf. Arist. *Nic.Eth.* 6.13.2).¹⁴ As Schoedel notes, the 'Hellenistic preoccupation with the difference between natural endowments and acquired properties lies behind Ignatius' statement', (Schoedel 1985: 138).

Again love is a key quality Ignatius wishes to promote, and he presents Polybius the bishop of Tralles as the example of love 'whose very demeanor is a great lesson and whose gentleness is his power' (*I.Trall.* 3.2). Here, however, the purpose of presenting Polybius' as an example is to 'awaken in the Trallians the appropriate attitude of submission' (Schoedel 1985: 143). Thus, the ethical standard highlighted by Ignatius is for the practical purpose of producing conformity to the ecclesial norms that he seeks to promote. In opposition to this communal unity based on love, Ignatius forewarns the Trallians against holding grudges, since disunity is seen as supplying non-believers with an opportunity to criticize the church (*I.Trall.* 8.2). Once more, the moral behaviour that is advocated stems from Ignatius' desire to produce cohesive communities that adhere to his understanding of ecclesial structures under the leadership of the episcopal figure.

1. 3. 4. Romans

It appears that Ignatius is largely ignorant about the organization and health of the communities of believers in Rome.¹⁵ It is impossible to know who would have received the letter directed to believers in the imperial capital. Moreover, the fact that Ignatius names no figures associated with the church in Rome, apart from the historic Peter and Paul, lends further weight to the suggestion that Ignatius was largely unaware of the structure or situation of the groups of Christian believers scattered

¹³ Deontological, or duty ethics set up an ethical framework in relation to a system of rules or commandments, and one's morality is judged in accordance with the maintenance of those normative precepts.

¹⁴ Aristotle's argument is far more focused and developed than the fleeting comment made by Ignatius: 'It is clear, then, from what has been said, that it is not possible to be good in the strict sense without practical wisdom, nor practically wise without moral virtue. But in this way we may also refute the dialectical argument whereby it might be contended that the virtues exist in separation from each other; the same man, it might be said, is not best equipped by nature for all the virtues, so that he will have already acquired one when he has not yet acquired another. This is possible in respect of the natural virtues, but not in respect of those in respect of which a man is called without qualification good; for with the presence of the one quality, practical wisdom, will be given all the virtues.' (cf. Arist. *Nic.Eth.* 6.13.2).

¹⁵ Here the reference to communities in Rome draws upon the insights of Peter Lampe on the 'fractionalism' of Christians in Rome during prior to the second half of the second century of the common era. Lampe describes the totality of the Christian movement in this period as 'the fractionation into house communities that were scattered throughout the metropolis.' (Lampe 2003: 381).

throughout the city. This limitation results in Ignatius not offering direct ethical instructions to the believers in Rome. However, the one repeated command he does give, not to attempt to prevent his martyrdom, reveals much about his understanding of discipleship which he views as the mode of correct Christian existence. Ignatius holds a value-inverting perspective on life. His impassioned plea ‘do not keep me from living, do not desire my death’ (*I.Rom.* 6.2), arises from the concern that he will not be able to complete his martyrdom. His true life is to be found in physical death, and he will only die if the Romans intervene in such a manner that means he continues to live his earthly life (Schoedel 1985: 183). In terms of his cosmology, true life cannot be found on earth, but only in the immaterial realm. Therefore, in this passage the concept of *imitatio Christi* comes to the fore, when Ignatius pleads with his addresses to ‘allow me to be an imitator of the sufferings of my God’ (*I.Rom.* 6.2). The example for the would-be martyr-disciple is the pattern of the crucified Christ. From Ignatius’ perspective martyrdom and ethics are inextricably linked especially when he is reflecting on his own impending death. As Löhr states, for Ignatius ‘[t]he highest realization of Christian morality is martyrdom. It is understood as suffering with the Lord (IgnSmyrn 4.2) and as an imitation of Christ (IgnRom 6.2)’, (Löhr 2010: 117).

The understanding of Christian ethics as finding fullest expression in the individual’s experience of Christ-like martyrdom is obviously a deviation from normative Hellenistic ethics. It arises from an understanding of the significance and life-giving efficacy of Christ’s death. It is, therefore, distinctive of the Christian sub-culture within a wider Hellenistic context, and magnified to an extreme by Ignatius in light of his impending fate. From this perspective the highest ethical calling of the follower of Christ is to imitate his death.

1. 3. 5. *Philadelphians*

Writing to the Philadelphians, Ignatius presents a paean of praise for their unnamed episcopal leader. He comments both to the bishop’s adherence to the commandments, as well as listing some of his virtuous qualities. Thus he states of the bishop,

For he is attuned to the commandments as a harp to its strings. Therefore my soul blesses his godly mind, well aware that it is virtuous and perfect, his steadfast nature, and his lack of anger, as one living with all godly gentleness. (*I.Philad.* 1.2).

Schoedel sees in this description resonances with the ethical values espoused in various Greek philosophical schools. Thus it is observed that ‘[t]he term “virtuous” (*ἐνάρητον*) is equally Hellenic, for it was a “favorite word of the Stoics.”’ (Schoedel 1985: 196). Lightfoot sees further Stoic ideas in this passage, especially in the reference to ‘steadfast’ or ‘unmovable’ (*ἀκίνητον*) character (Lightfoot, 1889: vol. 2, 57-58). Alongside this, however, Ignatius also views obedience to the commandments as an indicator of ethical life in addition to the possession of certain virtues. Moreover, the description of the one’s mind and gentleness being ‘of God’ reflects the way in which Ignatius has presented a list of virtues that would not be out of place in Hellenistic philosophy, but has imbued these with the Christian theological perspective that all that is virtuous finds its origin in the divine being (cf. Phil 4.8-9).

The remainder of the epistle says little that could be understood as ethical teaching. Perhaps the closest one finds is when Ignatius urges the Philadelphians to ‘do nothing in a spirit of contentiousness, but in accordance with the teachings of Christ’ (*I.Philad.* 8.2). Here ‘contentiousness’ or ‘strife’ (*ἐριθείαν*) is a negative quality that is contrasted with the positive moral life that is lived ‘in accordance with the teachings of Christ.’ For Ignatius the actual content of patterning one’s existence on Christ’s teachings is not explained, and presumably he considers it to be self-evident, or perhaps common teaching known from other contexts.

1. 3. 6. *Smyrnaeans*

As mentioned above, when writing to the believers in Smyrna Ignatius provides the clearest indication that his ethical outlook fundamentally revolves around individuals doing what is good, and striving for perfection both in actions and in thoughts (*I.Smyr.* 11.3). In that context he did not define or offer examples of what doing good might mean for those who were part of the Christian community. Earlier in the letter it becomes apparent that within the communal setting love for others is the basis of ethical behaviour, and it arises from a correct understanding of Christ and his embodied sacrifice. Ignatius does not provide examples of the behaviour that characterises such love. However, he does describe the actions that are neglected when love is not present. Therefore, from Ignatius' perspective, the corollary of a loving community is one where there is also a lack of ethical actions. Hence, lack of love is illustrative of a moral deficit that is fundamentally intertwined with defective theology. He presents his argument in the following manner:

Do not let high position make anyone proud, for faith and love are everything; nothing is preferable to them.

Now note well those who hold heretical opinions about the grace of Jesus Christ that came to us; note how contrary they are to the mind of God. They have no concern for love, none for the widow, none for the orphan, none for the oppressed, none for the prisoner or the one released, none for the hungry or thirsty. (*I.Smyr.* 6.1b-2a).

The pairing of 'faith and love' is, as Ignatius states, 'everything' in regard to living a virtuous life as a believer in Christ. The antithesis that is given in this context is pride that is link with the possession of high office. However, 'faith and love' together can transcend the tendency towards pride in one's status (on the incorruptibility of love, see *I.Eph.* 1.3; *I.Rom.* 7.3) (Löhr 2010: 112). Lightfoot argues for a causal link in Ignatius' thought between holding deviant beliefs and deficiencies in ethical behavior. He baldly states, '[t]heir doctrinal error leads to their moral failure' (Lightfoot, 1889: vol. 2, 57-58). It may, however be more correct to state that for Ignatius the two are linked, but perhaps not in a causal manner. Rather moral failure and incorrect belief are symptomatic of those who by nature are not predisposed either to virtuous living or faithful Christian discipleship. This perhaps explains why Ignatius can brook no discussion of his christological or ecclesiological beliefs. Those who deviate from what he considers to be correct beliefs are not only undeserving of a reply, they must in fact be avoided and shunned: 'people whom you must not only not welcome but, if possible, not even meet' (*I.Smyr.* 4.1).

Therefore, in *Smyrnaeans* Ignatius gives his most theologically developed ideas on morality and ethics, even if this theoretical reflection does not translate into detailed ethical instruction. The love and faith that are the hallmarks of a mature morality also reflect correct beliefs. By contrast, by definition at least for Ignatius, deficiency in either morality or beliefs indicates failure in the other area. In describing the lack of love among those with deviant beliefs, Ignatius sees neglect of practical works as indicative of the general absence of love. In particular, failing to show compassion for the most needy and destitute is an action that Ignatius attributes to those he accuses of holding erroneous beliefs. Whether Ignatius is being fair to his opponents, or engaging in stereotypical heresiological argument is open to debate. However, at least at a rhetorical level, Ignatius makes the link between the ethical and doctrinal deficiencies he attributes to his adversaries.

1. 3. 7. *Polycarp*

Ignatius' *Letter to Polycarp* is, both by its nature as a personal piece of correspondence to an individual and its warm tone addressed to a trusted lieutenant with similar views, the most personal of the seven letters in the corpus. Notwithstanding this difference, there are a number of ethical perspectives shared with the other six letters. Admittedly, these are framed slightly differently since they are written directly to

Polycarp. Perhaps the most obvious similarity in ethical outlook with the other letters is the link between correct beliefs and moral behaviour or true discipleship.

This relationship becomes prominent when Ignatius states, '[i]f you love good disciples, it is no credit to you; rather with gentleness bring the more troublesome ones into submission' (*I. Poly.* 2.1). In the next paragraph it becomes apparent that these troublesome disciples are those members of the community in Smyrna who are the ones 'who appear to be trustworthy yet who teach strange doctrines' (*I. Poly.* 3.1). From this point Ignatius turns to the topic of social order within the church (*I. Poly.* 4-5). Schoedel characterizes these issues as the 'somewhat less problematic areas of church life' (Schoedel 1985: 269). However, the comments addressed to the whole community at Smyrna reveal that Ignatius regards the lack of commitment to issues of social justice among the 'false teachers', as a key indication that their ethical understandings are misanthropic, precisely because their doctrines are misconceived. In a series of commands that are designed to regulate social order, Ignatius instructs Polycarp to instill the following behavior among believers at Smyrna.

Do not let widows be neglected ... Let nothing be done without your consent ... Let meetings be held more frequently ... Do not treat slaves, whether male or female, contemptuously, ... let them serve all the more faithfully to the glory of God, They should not have a strong desire to be set free at the church's expense, lest they be found to be slaves of lust. Flee from wicked practices; better yet, preach a sermon about them. Tell my sisters to love the Lord and to be content with their husbands physically and spiritually ... command my brothers ... to love their wives as the Lord loves the church. If anyone is able to remain chaste ... let him so remain without boasting ... it is proper for men and women who marry to be united with the consent of the bishop ... Let all things be done for the honour of God. (*I. Poly.* 4-5).

Here Ignatius moves from discussing care of the neglected and marginalized, into a more developed household code than those found in the Pauline epistles (cf. Col. 3.18-4.1; Eph. 5.21-28), and finally to his overarching theologized ethic that all behaviour done by a believer should be of such a standard that it might be judged honouring to God.¹⁶

Ignatius has already accused the teachers whom he opposes in Smyrna of having 'no concern ... for the widow' among other groups (*I. Poly.* 3.1). Here, writing to Polycarp, Ignatius presents the corollary of the perspective that bad doctrine and bad ethics are two sides of the same coin. Namely, that those not aligned with strange teachings do not neglect widows, or abuse slaves. Schoedel's observation on the social stratification of the community of believers in Smyrna appears correct, even if precision is not possible. He states, '[t]hat the bishop (and through him the congregation) is instructed not to despise them is one indication that slaves did not dominate the churches known to Ignatius' (Schoedel 1985: 270). However, the balancing statement addressed to believing slaves that manumission at the church's expense should not be considered an entitlement, reveals both that the community did not have unlimited resources, and that there were sufficient numbers of slaves to make this a topic of concern that required comment. Strikingly, Ignatius equates unrestrained pressure from slaves to be set free at cost to the community as 'lust'. In this way, Ignatius moves the unrelenting pursuit of one's own freedom into the sphere of ethically questionable activities.¹⁷

In even greater detail Ignatius addresses the related issues of marriage and chastity. Commitment and contentment appear to stand as the twin virtues that are to undergird marriage. Female members of the community are instructed 'to be content with their husbands physically and spiritually' (*I. Poly.* 5.1). Precisely what is meant by the call for contentment, literally, 'in the flesh and in the spirit' is not expanded upon. It seems reasonable to understand the first reference as sexual fidelity to the husband.

¹⁶ The command to honour God is repeated at various points in the letters of Ignatius

¹⁷ This point is also observed by Schoedel when he states, '[s]laves in particular were not to push for manumission for fear that they would find themselves in morally questionable situations.' (Schoedel 1985: 271).

The second reference is more perplexing. It might allude to a potential problem of believing wives being swayed by the instruction of the teachers with whom Ignatius disagrees. If so this would align with the same issues that are addressed in the Pastoral Epistles (1 Tim 2. 11-12; 2 Tim. 3.6-7; Tit 2.3-5). If that were the case, Ignatius is then advocating a more male dominated hierarchy that would have been welcomed as aligning with more traditional gender roles both in individual households and in the wider society.¹⁸ Similarly, males are commanded to demonstrate the committed love that is exemplified in Christ's love of the church. Here then, the personal ethics to be practised in a corporate setting are seen as flowing naturally from those who hold to correct doctrine.¹⁹

Polycarp is addressed by Ignatius more explicitly concerning issues of ethics than is the case with the letters addressed to communities. This frankness is an expression of the trust Ignatius has in the young bishop, and also that he sees him as a key instrument in combatting the doctrines that Ignatius himself opposes. In terms of ethical practices, Ignatius presents a code of ethics that emphasize practical care for the disenfranchised in the community, and an evenhanded treatment of all group members. He quashes any potential pride the sexually continent might feel was justified on the basis of their lifestyle choice. However, alongside this is recognition that chastity practised for the correct reasons is to be commended (*I. Poly.* 5.1). Thus it is possible to see that the ethics espoused by Ignatius form part of an interlocking belief system. The relationship between correct theology, obedience to the episcopal office, and practice of moral actions together form the life of discipleship, which finds its perfection in martyrdom.

1. 4. Conclusions

The themes of mission and ethics are not central topics of concern for Ignatius, and are rarely linked. Perhaps the clearest example where these themes overlap is in the injunction to 'Pray continually for the others of humankind ... that they might find God. Therefore allow them to be instructed by you, at least by your deeds.' (*I.Eph.* 10.1). The deeds that Ignatius describes constitute a fairly typical virtue list, including gentleness, humility, offering prayers, steadfastness, being civilized; and showing forbearance. Here the practice of such virtues has a twofold purpose. First to assist in missionary endeavours directed towards outsiders, and secondly to show outsiders that Christians were morally responsible and reliable members of society. This second point is made explicit when Ignatius declares, 'Let us show by our forbearance that we are their brothers and sisters' (*I.Eph.* 10.3). This outward-facing perspective on the practice of socially acceptable forms of ethical behaviour reflects the fact that Ignatius is concerned that the church should be morally attractive to those who are not part of it. In this sense communal ethics are seen as part of the attractiveness of the nascent Christian movement, and thereby function as a form of missionary activity.

Ignatius' engagement with wider society has been noted by a few scholars in passing previously. Thus Trebilco comments that 'Ignatius encourages the Ephesians to have a very open attitude to outsiders' (Trebilco 2004: 701). In a slightly more detailed manner Schoedel notes the way Ignatius' contemporary culture had impacted on his thought, although the understanding of wider culture is refracted through the lens of his Christian faith commitments. Because the interaction with wider society is

¹⁸ In relation to 2 Tim 3.6-7 Dibelius and Conzelmann, who attribute 'Gnostic spiritualism' to the opponents in the Pastorals, note that 'the Gnostics instead brought such women to a strict asceticism.' (Dibelius & Conzelmann 1972: 116).

¹⁹ Here again Ignatius inhabits the world of the Pastoral Epistles, since those writings likewise accuse false teachers of bad morals. The link between false doctrine and a depraved mind, that in turn leads to corrupting practices appears in a more sequential pattern in the Pastorals than in Ignatius, cf. 1 Tim 6.3-10; 2 Tim 3.1-13. In relation to the second of those passages Marshall notes, 'the activity of the heretics in the church is to be seen as part of the general deterioration in morality.' (Marshall 1999: 769).

often subsumed beneath wider theological or ecclesiological concerns, its presence can be underplayed or missed. Hence Schoedel states, 'the spirit of the popular Hellenistic culture remains more alive in his letters than is generally recognized' (Schoedel 1985: 17).

This imprint of Hellenistic culture leaves its stamp on the way in which Ignatius formulates his ethics. In particular, Ignatius largely adopts a virtue ethics approach to his moral teaching. His injunction, 'being perfect, also think perfect things' (*I.Smyr.* 11.3), resonates with Aristotelian perspective that the practice of human good stems from the soul's pursuit of virtue (*Arist. Nic.Eth.* 1.7.5). However, Ignatius' indebtedness to Hellenistic philosophical notions of ethics is easily missed because typically his descriptions of moral actions are formulated specifically in response to the communal life of believers, and are grounded in Christian theological convictions. In this vein, the repeated focus on the pairing faith and love both as the cardinal virtues for believers is given a theological foundation, since according to Ignatius, these virtues find their ultimate basis through the experience of union with Christ (*I.Eph.* 1.1).

Negatively, Ignatius lambasts those with whose teachings he disagrees as also being morally corrupt. For Ignatius incorrect doctrine is a sign that a person is also ethically deficient, and *vice versa*. In part this reflects the familiar tactics of ancient rhetoric, whereby one's opponents were smeared in every manner possible. In the most prominent example of this approach Ignatius describes those who hold opinions contrary to his own about 'the grace of Jesus Christ' as being morally corrupt since have no concern for the widow, orphan, oppressed, and various other marginal members of society (*I.Smyr.* 6.1b-2a).

Ultimately, Ignatius devotes more attention to rejecting the Christological perspectives of those with whom he disagrees and promoting his preferred form of ecclesial structure, than he does to treating either the theme of mission or ethics. Notwithstanding this relative lack of space, Ignatius' perspectives in the areas of mission or ethics are revealing. In relation to both of these topics he displays a palpable openness towards Hellenistic culture. This is perhaps unsurprising. For unlike Barclay's model of a continuum of acculturation, assimilation, and accommodation used to describe the integration of diaspora Jews into wider Hellenistic society (Barclay 1996: 103-124), it appears that the majority of Ignatius' addressees would themselves be classed as indigenous members of Hellenistic society. Therefore, the substructure of Ignatius' discourse reflects Greek culture, and for the readers their default values and social outlook reflect an upbringing within that cultural matrix. Therefore, Ignatius' task is in some ways different from those authors addressing diaspora Jews living in Hellenistic contexts. For Ignatius his concern is the creation and maintenance of a sub-culture that can operate inside the larger cultural milieu while being neither subsumed because of its lack of distinctiveness, nor being totally rejected because of an intolerable degree of difference. The way this tension appears to be negotiated is through an attitude towards that is largely positive, and an ethical system that is both familiar in its content to a Hellenistic audience to command assent, yet distinctive enough in its theoretical underpinnings to be presented as deserving of consideration. It is through the creative process of more securely grounding the theoretical basis of his traditional system of virtue ethics in the participatory idea of union with Christ, that Ignatius bridges this gap. In the process his ethics become one of his tools for mission directed towards those who are not part of the community of believers. From this perspective a moral life is seen as a form of outreach to those members of Hellenistic society who are not members of the communities of faith addressed by Ignatius.

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